

Who Did It?

■ **History:** Amateur sleuths convene to sift through hard facts and hearsay about J.F.K.'s death. They're still pursuing leads.

By MARK EHRMAN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

DALLAS—The Hands of Justice didn't take sides. Carl E. Justice III stood in the lobby of the Hyatt Regency, surrounded by his collection of about 100 images of President John F. Kennedy, including a giant portrait made of leather. Justice, nicknamed "The Hands of Justice," sought nothing, sold nothing, asked nothing.

"I just liked the man," he says, noting that he was in Dallas working in a beauty shop the day Kennedy was shot. "He inspired me in so many ways that I thought I would try to preserve his memory," says Justice, who now lives in Tulsa, Okla.

Justice had no agenda. Not so the 400 or so other attendees at what organizers hope will be an annual Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy (ASK). Witnesses, researchers and the just plain curious came together last weekend to raise and discuss questions surrounding Kennedy's death 28 years ago today.

Theories about one of history's great whodunits were advanced by the legitimate and not so

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legitimate at the conference, sponsored by the Dallas-based J.F.K. Assassination Information Center, a clearinghouse for J.F.K. conspiracy information.

But in the end, little was resolved.

A short list of suspects and co-conspirators included the CIA, the Mafia, J. Edgar Hoover, L.B.J., Dan Rather (yes, *that* Dan Rather), George Bush, Richard Nixon, Jacqueline Kennedy, anti-Castro Cubans and various combinations of the above. Intriguing facts, connections, coincidences and speculation surrounded each.

The tableau was full of mysterious figures—who have been given names such as Umbrella Man, The Three Tramps, Badge Man and Black Dog Man—who have never been satisfactorily identified. Some, like Umbrella Man, were clearly visible in photographs and were seen by witnesses. Why did a man on a sunny day twirl an umbrella the instant the President was shot . . . then calmly leave the scene?

None, however, was more mysterious than the prime suspect, Lee Harvey Oswald. A former Marine, defector to the Soviet Union and FBI informant, he protested his innocence, claiming he was "just a patsy." He was shot by strip-joint owner Jack Ruby before he could be brought to trial.

For many at the symposium, sifting through hard facts and hearsay is the obsession of a lifetime.

"I've collected books on it ever since it happened," said Ron Shapiro, a publishers' representative from Huntington Beach. Shapiro was 16 and in a high school gym class when he heard about the assassination. "I definitely believe it was a conspiracy. I've had this strong feeling that we gave up part of our democracy then, and we're not going to get it back unless we find out who did it."

To this end, the conference assembled a group of authors and researchers, including, among the credible, Jim Marrs, author of "Crossfire," one of the books on which Oliver Stone based his forthcoming movie, "JFK." All the authors, of course, brought their books to sell and sign.

Other assassination curiosities

included VHS tapes of the famous Zapruder film, newspapers from Nov. 22, 1963, and detailed blueprints of Dealey Plaza.

Key witnesses also were gathered.

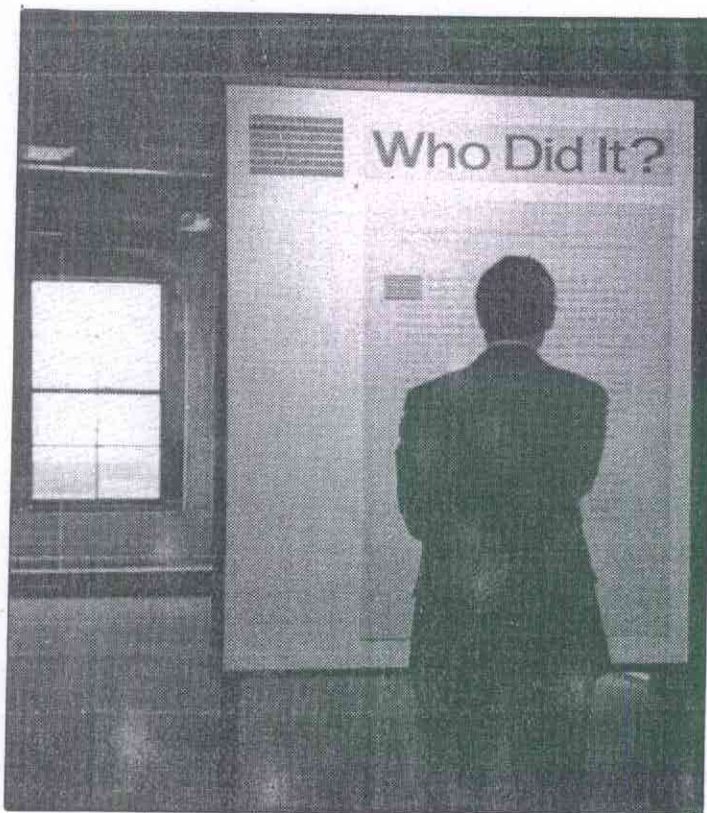
■ Jean Hill, who stood in Dealey Plaza, claimed she's positive the shots came from the grassy knoll in front of the motorcade, not from the Texas School Book Depository.

■ Aubrey Rike, who worked for O'Neal Funeral Home, said he put Kennedy in a bronze coffin in Dallas, not the one taken off the plane in Washington.

During the symposium, guests fanned out, each pursuing what they considered the most important leads. Jack Brazil, for example, a roofing contractor from Tyler, Tex., came to find out who owned a 1961 Chevy spotted entering the School Book Depository parking lot minutes before the shots rang out, and was seen leaving minutes after.

"I'm going to find that Chevy," Brazil said. "I've spent \$1,600 in telephone calls in one year just trying to track it down."

The J.F.K. Assassination Center sold a bus tour that took the curious past the relevant sites, while the driver and a video monitor filled in the passengers on pertinent facts. The trip concluded with a visit to The Sixth Floor, the



CURT WALTHEIM / For The Times

Visitor studies exhibit at The Sixth Floor, the museum in the old Texas School Book Depository built around Kennedy's assassination.

museum at the old depository, where, according to the plaque outside, Oswald "allegedly" shot Kennedy. It's "the only monument to a place where nothing happened," quipped author and early Warren Commission critic Mark Lane.

Little attention was paid to the official version of events. (The Warren Commission report in 1964 said there was one gunman; the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979 said there were two.)

Only one panelist, Jim Moore, dared dissent from the dissenters. His book, "A Conspiracy of One," defended the single bullet theory, on which the Warren Commission built its case. His reward for providing contrast was the derision of audience and panelists alike.

One reason the center seems keen on selling the conspiracy idea is, perhaps, because it is selling conspiracy. Unlike The Sixth Floor, which is run by the Dallas County Historical Society, the Assassination Information Center is run for profit, featuring an exhibit in a tourist mall in downtown Dallas. Thus, many assassination researchers charge, the focus is on

sensational but poorly researched theories.

A case in point is the "Montage of Conspiracy." This was hyped by the center as "new information" that had never been made public. "Montage" turned out to be computer imagery.

Through a hodgepodge of colors, computer-image processor Tom

Wilson claimed he could make out—among other things—the outline of a badge on the lapel of a supposed gunman lurking behind the fence on the grassy knoll from a third-generation Polaroid image taken from 50 yards away. He also claimed his gizmo could catch the bullets in mid-air in the Zapruder film.

Wilson received a standing ovation.

Some serious researchers, though, were galled. "Hocus-pocus," says Gus Russo, who's done consulting work for Oliver Stone and PBS.

"The Kennedy assassination is fit for scholarly research. But you wouldn't know it from this stuff," says Russo, who came from Baltimore despite his skepticism.

Others, such as Gary Mack, a Kennedy researcher and news producer and, archivist for an NBC affiliate in Ft. Worth, stayed away from conference.

"I think the idea of a symposium is terrific," says Mack, who is also an unpaid consultant for The Sixth Floor. "But these guys are a for-profit operation . . . [they] rub me the wrong way."

Larry Howard, president and co-director of the center, says the organization is not in it for the money. Organizers didn't get a nonprofit charter, he says, because "we wanted to start quickly and didn't have time . . . to get all the paperwork done."

Howard attributes the criticism to "part-time researchers that are jealous of what we're doing here."

Mack, however, counters that the center does a disservice by propagating stories that he calls "goofy and sensationalist."

"This isn't a sideshow, folks," says Mack. "This is a murder investigation."